

What is Sahwa, the Awakening movement under pressure in Saudi?

Scholars linked to movement are reportedly on death row, but Sahwa has not always been out of favour with the kingdom.



by Arwa Ibrahim

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The Saudi al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya (Islamic Awakening), or Sahwa, was a period of powerful social and political change in [Saudi Arabia](#) between the 1960s and 1980s.

Despite several waves of state repression since the 1990s, the [Muslim Brotherhood](#)-inspired religious movement has maintained an influence over the years.

Although groups within the movement held a range of ideas, they believed in non-violence and supported an intersection between religion and politics.

Several Sahwa figures worked to increase the role of religious scholars in politics as well as public representation in the Saudi state, challenging the royal family's hegemony.

Groups under the Sahwa umbrella also held diverse views on society, but overall had progressive views - for instance, some supported more women's rights - compared with the rest of Saudi Arabia.

Fundamentally, the groups advocated for incorporating Islamic teaching into education and daily lives.

Recently, Saudi Crown Prince [Mohammed bin Salman](#) (commonly known as MBS) has cracked down on potential opponents, including religious scholars who have been inspired by or involved with the Sahwa.

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Saudi cleric's son: 'Everyone is threatened'

Among the most prominent detainees are Saudi Muslim scholars Salman al-Awdah, Awad al-Qarni, and Ali al-Omari.

All three face the death penalty and, according to unconfirmed reports, may be executed after Ramadan.

What is the Sahwa?

The Sahwa is a phenomenon which saw Muslim Brotherhood-inspired reformist movements influence Saudi society.

In its original sense, it has ceased to exist, but the Sahwa's ideas and activists remain influential.

Dating back to the 1950s, when King Faysal al-Saud was in power, Saudi Arabia gave shelter to thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members who had fled repressive governments in [Egypt](#), [Syria](#) and elsewhere.

The exiles propagated their ideology as they became entrenched in key government positions and lead educational roles at universities and schools. They also incorporated elements of Saudi religious culture into their way of thinking.

"Members of the Muslim Brotherhood saw the need to incorporate Saudi traditions into their outlooks as they adapted to their new environment," said Saad al-Faqih, a Saudi dissident who grew up at the height of the Sahwa and who heads the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia.

The movement was therefore born out of a marriage between the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology and the Saudi state's Salafi-Wahhabi tradition, said al-Faqih.

"The Sahwa was an amalgam of the two traditions. It produced a strong and impressive approach that succeeded in attracting the youth and revolutionising society," said al-Faqih.

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MBS's current crackdown on Sahwa will fail. Ideas cannot be suppressed. When the time is right, these people will re-emerge and express themselves once again.

AHMED BIN RASHID BIN SAID, SAUDI PROFESSOR IN EXILE IN THE UK

By the 1970s, the Sahwa had become a network of several religious groups that adopted a wide range of religious and social outlooks, some more conservative than others.

"The Sahwa is not a movement, but a phenomenon. It developed naturally rather than at the hands of a certain group of people. It also included many activists and a range of ideologies," explained al-Faqih.

Some say Sahwa led religious revival and reform, which was experienced throughout the Muslim world.

"The Sahwa is an Islamic revival that arose from among the grassroots as an expression of faith in Islam as a comprehensive way of life," Ahmed bin Rashid bin Said, a Saudi professor of communication who now lives in exile in the [United Kingdom](#), told Al Jazeera.

What is Sahwa's ideology and what does it want?

At their inception, Sahwa movements were defined by their propagation of a counterculture that spoke against prevalent social norms. In time, their outlook became more politicised.

According to al-Faqih, "Islamist" groups that developed under the umbrella of the Sahwa mostly focused on education and social activities, such as setting up summer camps for young people.

"Sahwa's view attracted the youth that had been sidelined by the state's clergy. It focused on building pride in the Muslim identity and a sense of responsibility towards Muslims around the world," said al-Faqih.

In addition, religion was considered as having a role in politics, an atypical view in Saudi Arabia at the time.

"Traditionally, the Saudi clergy left politics to al-Saud [Saudi ruling family], but new leaders [from within Sahwa] encouraged an interest in non-traditional views such as politics and voting," said al-Faqih. "They saw Islam through a practical and comprehensive lens that addresses all issues."

According to Ali al-Ahmed, a Washington-based Saudi analyst and expert on Islamic movements and Saudi political history, the state saw this aspect of Sahwa's ideology as a threat.

"The Sahwa challenged the idea that there should be obedience to the ruler, introducing ideas that were not welcome in the Wahhabi quarters," he said.

How did the movement rise to prominence?

Although the Saudi state eventually cracked down on Sahwa movements, the government was instrumental in their growth until the 1990s, say experts.

This was not only true with regards to the movements' social and educational activities but also their political undertakings.

"Sahwa's political activity during the 1980s was strongly supported and encouraged by the state. The state was actually the leader of the Sahwa at the time, particularly when it comes to the Afghan jihad," Professor Said told Al Jazeera.

According to al-Faqih, Sahwa's rise in the 1980s can be traced to three pivotal events: the seizure of the holy mosque in Mecca by a hardline group, the [Iranian Revolution](#), and the Afghan War.



Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is believed to be leading efforts to stifle dissent [Bandar Algaloud/Courtesy of Saudi Royal Court/Handout via Reuters]

In 1979, a former army corporal, Juhayman al-Otaybi, took control of the Grand Mosque in Mecca at a time when Saudi Arabia was trying to push through plans for social reforms.

"The incident was a big lesson for the state. It forced it to reign in its Westernisation project [in an attempt to appease Saudi Islamists]," said al-Faqih.

That same year, the Iranian Revolution posed another challenge. To push back Iranian influence, the kingdom sponsored "Islamist" activities among the Sahwa movements to propagate an image of a benevolent Saudi monarchy, said al-Faqih.

"The success of the Iranian revolution forced the Saudi regime to try to prove itself as a better Sunni example after Khomeini sold Islam as a successful way of ridding Muslim countries of tyrants," said al-Faqih.

The third factor was Saudi Arabia's decision to support Afghan fighters against the Soviet invasion, a position taken by its ally, the [United States](#).

Analysts have said that Saudi Arabia supported Sahwa movements to persuade thousands of Saudis to either finance or fight alongside the mujahidin in [Afghanistan](#).

"For a decade, Saudis were engrossed in the Afghan War and encouraged to support the mujahidin financially," said Professor Said. "Thousands of Saudis joined the fight and the state didn't try to stop them. Instead, leaders of the jihad were welcomed in Riyadh."

What is the Sahwa's relationship with the state?

The relationship between the Sahwa and the state has been through several stages.

The first phase of state sponsorship and support ended with the Gulf War, which saw Riyadh allow US troops to deploy on Saudi soil.

The move provoked an angry response and coincided with calls for political reform, led by Sahwa figures such as Salman al-Awdah and Safar al-Hawali.

"The 1990s saw the initiation of the first mature political step by Sahwa with the publication of 12 demands in a letter to the state," said al-Faqih.

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When my father was released, his audience and following grew in Saudi Arabia and beyond. During that phase, he helped the state a lot in their fight against extremism. He propagated a moderate Islam and worked to fight extremism by engaging the people.

ABDULLAH ALAODH, A POST-DOCTORAL FELLOW AT GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

The demands, which included power-sharing, reforming the justice system and fighting corruption, were then detailed in a 44-page memorandum a year later, he said.

The state responded by cracking down on the Sahwa movements and imprisoning hundreds of Sahwa activists and several of its leaders, including al-Awdah and al-Hawali in 1994.

When they were released in the late 1990s, a phase of rapprochement began as the state relied on the likes of al-Awdah to fight "extremism", especially following the events of 9/11.

"When my father was released, his audience and following grew in Saudi Arabia and beyond," Abdullah Alaoudh, a post-doctoral fellow at Georgetown University, told Al Jazeera.

"During that phase, he [Salman al-Awdah] helped the state a lot in their fight against extremism. He propagated a moderate Islam and worked to fight extremism by engaging the people."

But the relationship soured once again following the [Arab Spring](#) of 2011, as dozens of Sahwa figures - including al-Awdah - supported the revolutions, with some calling for swift reforms in the kingdom.

Why did MBS detain prominent Sahwa figures?

Fearing that the revolutionary tide would reach the kingdom, Saudi Arabia attempted to crush dissent.

After MBS became crown prince, he intensified repression against a wide range of potential opponents including Saudi Islamists, especially those affiliated with the Sahwa.

"MBS doesn't like competition and people who aren't under his control. He is afraid of any opposition and believes these people [Sahwa activists] will overthrow his regime," explained Saudi analyst al-Ahmed.

Alaoudh said: "MBS decided to remove independent voices that can ask for real change and demand basic liberties while also presenting a discourse that has religious authority and legitimacy."

What is the Sahwa's future?

According to al-Ahmed, the latest crackdown of the state on Sahwa leaders may see a complete separation

between the two for good.

"If the Sahwa is given its freedom again, it has the potential for becoming more powerful than the government because it responds to and addresses issues that impact society.

"But the relationship between the two has reached final divorce as MBS is unlikely to go back on his approach," said al-Ahmed, warning that the execution of al-Awdah and others could lead to society losing faith in the state.

Despite the clampdown, however, Professor Said believes that the Sahwa will survive.

"MBS's current crackdown on Sahwa will fail. Ideas cannot be suppressed," he said. "When the time is right, these people will re-emerge and express themselves once again."

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